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Citation for published version:

Loretto, W & Vickerstaff, S 2015, 'Gender, age and flexible working in later life', *Work, Employment And Society*, vol. 29, no. 2, pp. 233-249. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017014545267>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1177/0950017014545267](https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017014545267)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Work, Employment And Society

Publisher Rights Statement:

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Gender, age and flexible working in later life

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Abstract

In many countries economic and social concerns associated with ageing populations have focused attention onto flexible forms of working as key to encouraging people to work longer and delay retirement. This article argues that there has been a remarkable lack of attention paid to the role of gender in extending working lives and contends that this gap has arisen because of two, inter-related, oversights: little consideration of relationships between gender and flexible working beyond the child-caring phase of life; and the prevailing tendency to think of end of working life and retirement as gender-neutral or following a typical male trajectory. The findings of a qualitative study of people aged 50+ in the UK challenge some of the key assumptions underpinning the utility of flexible work in extending working lives, and provide insight into the ways in which working in later life is constructed and enacted differently for men and women.

Key words: Age; flexible working; gender; later-life working; older workers; qualitative; retirement; work-life balance

Introduction

In the UK, as in other industrialised nations, there is considerable government interest and concern over an ageing workforce and a strong policy thrust toward extending working lives. In the future it is hoped that more people will work until state pension age and beyond, and indeed in many countries state pension ages are rising (OECD, 2011). It is routinely asserted that greater opportunities to work flexibly will encourage older workers to continue in work and delay retirement (e.g. OECD, 2006: 98-101). In addition, survey evidence often indicates a demand amongst older workers (those aged 50 plus) to work flexibly. Much of this policy and practice discussion of the utility of increasing

flexible work options (FWOs) for older workers is uncritical about the availability and quality of flexible work. In addition, it is typically gender blind with remarkably little scrutiny of gender differences, notwithstanding the high proportion of older women who already work flexibly in the sense of part-time work. This gap reflects two related shortfalls in theorisation: the 'taken-for-granted' associations between gender, age and flexible working - that it is primarily an issue for people, and particularly women, with school age or younger children; and a lack of understanding of gender and retirement. Drawing upon a qualitative study of over-50s in GB, this article interrogates the intersections of gender and age in flexible working to begin to fill these gaps.

The article commences with a brief overview of the proposed attractions and utility of FWOs for older workers, i.e. those aged 50 and above, before drawing upon existing research into gender and flexible working and gender and retirement to hypothesise ways in which gender and age might interact to shape attitudes, opportunities and experiences of flexible working in later life. It then explores these assumptions through a qualitative study of 96 people aged 50-64, drawing upon their revealed discourses of flexible working. Finally, it discusses the implications of the findings for theorising relationships between work and life in later life and policy around extended working lives.

Flexible working and the older worker

For the purposes of this article, we define 'workplace flexibility as the ability of workers to make choices influencing when, where, and for how long they engage in work-related tasks' (Hill et al, 2008: 152). The main emphasis of policy, practitioner and academic interest in FWOs has centred round combining paid work with caring, most often familial responsibilities, typically carrying an implicit age and/or life-stage bias towards men and women with younger children. However, a body of work seeking to explore the utility of FWOs in sustaining older workers in employment for longer (Alden, 2012; Barnes et al, 2009; Gardiner et al, 2007; Hirsch, 2007:108-113; Loretto et al, 2005; Moen and Sweet, 2004; Yeandle, 2005) has broadened this conceptualisation.

As outlined in the introduction, prompted by policy attention, it has been espoused that flexible working offers an attractive way for older workers to stay in work for longer than they could or would if they were working full-time, to extend their working lives beyond expected or normal retirement ages and/or to exercise choice in the nature and timing of their retirement. FWOs, especially part-time working, have been held up as a means of improving choices for older workers (Loretto et al, 2005; 2007), for example by downshifting at the end of their working careers with their current employer and hence delaying full retirement, or by providing 'bridge jobs' between the career occupation and full retirement (Loretto et al, 2005; Vickerstaff, 2010). UK Government policy has also supported the need to create greater flexibility for people to 'choose a phased approach to retirement' (Department for Work and Pensions, 2006:139). Survey data show a strong expressed preference

for working flexibly at the end of working life (Maitland, 2010; Smeaton et al, 2009); or for re-engaging in flexible work after retirement, mainly for financial reasons (Smeaton et al, 2009: 58-59). Beyond these attractions, FWOs offer opportunities to the third of the 50+ workforce with a long-term health condition (Barnes et al, 2009: 2) to remain in work, and to the long-term unemployed or inactive (often because of health reasons) in order to ease them back into the labour market (Humphrey et al, 2003; Hudson et al, 2009: 69). One in five people in the age group 50-59 are providing informal or unpaid care (Howard, 2004). A minority of those between 45-65 find themselves as the 'sandwich or pivot generation', combining care for their own children with informal care for elderly parents (Evandrou and Glaser, 2004: 771; Mooney et al, 2002: 1). Research suggests that those who combine employment and caring would welcome a range of flexible working options. In particular they would appreciate: better access to flexible working hours; the opportunity to reduce working hours if necessary; the right to time-off for caring responsibilities; and the ability to work from home where feasible (Howard, 2004; Mooney et al, 2002).

Given the myriad of attractions of FWOs, it is not surprising that there is some evidence from the US that older workers may value access to FWOs more highly than younger workers (Pitt-Catsouphe and Matz-Costa, 2008). However, what is more remarkable is the lack of attention paid to the role of gender in the policy and practice debates. We contend that this gap has arisen because of two, inter-related, oversights: the limited focus on the relationships between gender and flexible working which has focused mainly

on one life stage; and the prevailing tendency to think of end of working life and retirement as gender-neutral or following a typical male trajectory. We now explore each of these in turn.

Gender, age and flexible working

The predominant policy and research focus on flexible working has centred round parents, especially mothers, who are trying to combine paid work with childcare (see for example, Craig and Powell, 2011; Lyonette et al, 2011). In the UK, this was signalled in the genesis of legislative approaches to flexible working and work-life balance as ‘family-friendly’ policies. As such, Emslie and Hunt (2009) argue that most studies [of work-life overlap] ‘either ignore gender or take it for granted’ (p152). This assertion is reflected in the findings that women are more likely to take up FWOs to accommodate childcare and family responsibilities, whereas men tend to use FWOs to extend their working hours (Hofacker and Konig, 2013, Martinengo et al, 2010), thereby reinforcing the traditional male-breadwinner family model and gender roles. However, thinking about flexible working in later life when childcare responsibilities in theory are less dominating, allows us to go beyond gender roles associated with parenthood and to more fully interrogate the relationships between gender and flexible working. This opens up the opportunity to use life stage as ‘a focus issue in explorations of gender differences’ (Martinengo et al, 2010: 1364) rather than simply controlling for age as a ‘noise’ variable.

Only a few studies to date have examined the relationships between gender and flexible working in later life stages. Emslie and Hunt's (2009) qualitative examination of gender and work-life balance in mid-life (age 50-52) found very strong evidence of traditional gender identities among women, even where their roles had been non-traditional, for example women's identity remained family-bound even in cases where a woman took up full-time working because her partner had been made redundant. Amongst the men, the study found some who changed their mentality over time, moving from a live to work orientation to a work to live focus. In another qualitative study, this time of Australian women in two age groups (53-58 and 65-70), Everingham et al (2007) discerned three patterns of engagement with flexible working in the transitions to retirement. The first was non-engagement, i.e. women who simply stopped work, adhering to the more traditional 'cliff-edge' retirement. The second was the 'transitional model' where the women used flexible working to gradually retire. Although the authors acknowledge that this model appears to adhere most closely to the government's model for using flexible working as a transition to retirement, for women as opposed to men, this was only one of many such transitions they had made over their working lives. A third model arose from a group of women who wanted to use flexible working to open up new working opportunities – to transform the nature of their work. Cebulla et al (2007) conducted secondary analysis of major panel data sets to examine the repercussions of working longer on the private lives of men and women beyond the UK's state pension age (SPA – 60 for women and 65 for men at the time of the study). They set out to investigate the effects of flexible working, but their main finding was that working longer in any capacity (full-

time or part-time) affected the gender divisions of household tasks, with traditional gender divisions being much less pronounced in non-working SPA couple households, but retained among those who stayed in work (whether or not that work was flexible).

While these studies are welcome, their insights are inevitably partial. Emslie and Hunt's work, although extending the parameters of work-life balance and flexible working beyond parents of small children, still retained a fairly narrow focus on family life. The Australian study looked only at women; whereas Cebulla et al's only examined behaviour of men and women beyond SPA and did not provide illumination of the relationships between gender and flexible working per se. We also maintain that any opportunity for, or disposition towards, FWOs in later life builds on previous experience of FWOs and therefore we need to understand the relationship between gender, age and FWOs across the lifecourse. For many women FWOs have characterised their labour market activity across the lifecourse and do not suddenly emerge in later life as a possible response to pending retirement.

Gender and retirement

The traditional notion of retirement as 'an event experienced by men at the end of their careers' (Ho and Raymo, 2009: 153) has been disrupted by the move to extend working lives. In their comprehensive review of retirement, Wang and Shultz (2010) challenge the concept of retirement as a discrete event, by examining the main ways in which retirement is now conceptualised:

as decision-making; as an adjustment process; as a career development stage; and as a human resource management concern. Indeed, retirement is increasingly seen as a reversible state rather than an end destination (see Maestas (2010) on 'unretirement'). However, in these discussions, as in research and policy attention more generally, gender is largely absent or loosely implied into notions of 'societal norms' of family roles and/or marital status. In particular, understanding of women's retirement processes is limited because of 'a tendency to view women's retirement and retirement planning relative to normative understandings already established for men.' (Wong and Hardy, 2009: 77). A small body of work (most of it from the USA and quantitative in nature) has challenged the prevailing tendency, asserting that because of differences in work trajectories, financial security and family responsibilities (see Price, 2003), we need to consider men's and women's retirement separately. However, Wang and Shultz (2010) remind us that little empirical research exists to confirm the theorising, and that gender is often reduced to the status of a moderator variable in retirement transitions (see also Pleau, 2010).

An additional element to the lack of attention to gender has been the tendency to view decisions around retirement as not only male or de-gendered, but also as individualised (see Lewis, 2007's concept of the 'adult worker'), whereas in reality, many decisions are embedded in domestic contexts which combine established family and gender roles with more temporally proximal factors (O'Rand et al, 1992: 83). Existing research has been instructive in showing that women's retirement is typically more influenced by their husband's

retirement and by their family-roles and patterns of labour market participation across the life-course than is the case for men (e.g. Price and Nesteruk, 2008, Pleau, 2010). Nevertheless, research to date ‘disproportionately represents the experiences of married women’ (Price, 2003: 351), and of professional women. It has also been focused mainly on the timing of retirement, with relatively little investigation into how the nature, meaning and processes of retirement may differ between men and women (Flynn, 2010; Loretto and Vickerstaff, 2013).

In summary therefore, limited attention to women’s retirement and to the ways in which gender and flexible working inter-relate in later life have left us with some key knowledge gaps surrounding the attitudes and behaviours of older men and women towards FWOs. We argue that a fuller understanding is necessary in order to provide a currently absent evidence-base (see Gielan, 2008) for the efficacy of FWOs in policies aimed at extending working lives.

The qualitative study

The project was commissioned by the UK government’s Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to investigate the factors encouraging labour market activity among people aged 50-64 (Vickerstaff et al, 2008). Ninety-six people in three contrasting British locations were interviewed. Edinburgh was chosen as representative of an area with relatively low unemployment and generally good standards of living; in contrast Thanet in Kent is an area of high unemployment and socio-economic disadvantage. Nottingham is a site of

average unemployment and a younger and more ethnically-diverse population. Overall, as can be seen in Table 1, the study focus was on people/households with low-medium income levelsⁱ, with the spread of household income in each of the three locations reflecting the socio-economic characteristics of that region. Within each location, the sample was purposively selected to capture a range of personal (age, gender, marital status), health, financial, caring and employment statuses. The economic activity status categories in Table 1 are based on respondents' self-definitions. All but two in the retired group had retired 'early', i.e. before current SPAs. Three men in the retired group who described themselves as 'semi-retired' were self-employed, but in practice had a very loose attachment to the labour market.

Table 1 here

Respondents were interviewed in couples or as individuals using a biographical time-line and a semi-structured schedule. The interviews typically lasted for about an hour and a half and were digitally recorded. The transcribed interviews were analysed using NVivo 7. First, each interview was analysed for a set of respondent descriptive attributes, i.e. age, gender, employment status, location, household income etc. Interviews with couples were coded twice, once for the female and once for the male respondent. Next, the interviews were coded for references or answers to direct questions that respondents were asked, for example direct experience of working flexibly. Third the interviews were coded interpretively for references to factors affecting continued working, retirement and flexible working.

In the account which follows, quotations from the interviews are used as examples representative of views and recurring themes or discourses expressed by a number of different respondents (on drawing conclusions from qualitative data see Miles and Huberman, 1984: 215-221). The reference number at the end of quotations indicates the location of the interviewee (E= Edinburgh, N=Nottingham and T= Thanet) and whether they were interviewed as an individual or as part of a couple (S/C), their gender (M/F) and their economic activity status at the time of the interview.

Results

Overview

Although the sample exhibited heterogeneity of behaviours and attitudes towards flexible working in later life, overall there was a relatively low incidence of flexible working across all groups (Table 1; those who were retired or not working were classified on the basis of their most recent job). This low incidence reflects national patterns. Even though there have been increases in employment rates of the over-50s and over 65s in recent years (ONS, 2013a; 2013b), analysis of official figures (see Loretto et al (2005) and updated personal analysis – details from authors on request) suggest that the majority of older men are working on full-time permanent contracts and that despite a much higher proportion of women work part-time (as is the case throughout the working life) the proportion of men and women over-50 in

employment who work part-time has **fallen** in recent years, i.e. the increase in older worker employment has been in full-time, not part-time jobs. In addition, most over-50s are working in permanent positions. The extent of other forms of flexible employment (e.g. locational flexibility, flexible contracts) is relatively insignificant. Most men work full time and then 'retire'; there is little evidence for gradual retirement. These findings for the British case are echoed in comparative review, which found that across a range of European and North American countries there were only limited "signs of flexibilisation of work patterns" for older workers, especially in comparison to changes in the youth labour markets (Hofacker, 2010:184-199).

Returning to our sample, also mirroring national patterns, the most common form of flexibility was part-time working, with women being markedly more likely to have worked part-time across their lifecourse. Typically they had stopped work when their first child was born and then had returned to work, often different work, part time as the children got older. Many then further modified their hours in later life to undertake caring for elderly parents, an ailing partner or grandchildren. In order to explore more fully the relationships between age, gender and flexible working in later life, we have drawn on the main discourses presented by our respondents with regard to the role of flexible working throughout their lives and as they approached or experienced retirement. In some cases, men and women presented quite different discourses; in others we show how the same terminology had separate meanings for men and for women. Although separated for analytical purposes, it should be noted that these discourses do overlap.

Freedom

This was a dominant discourse amongst the interviewees, whether retired or still working – many respondents were strongly attracted to the freedom that release from work had given or was expected to give them. As such, they would not or had not considered flexible working in any guise. However, the way in which this freedom was articulated was highly gendered. For several women who were retired, this freedom manifested itself as escape from a low quality and unsatisfying job, most often involving ‘flexible’ working. The following quote is from a respondent who retired aged 56. Her work experience reflected that of many of the women in the sample, who had often give up skilled jobs to work flexibly when raising their families and who had ended up in a lifetime of underemployment.

‘...I couldn’t get out of there quick enough, basically. I only worked 3 days which was fine. The hours suited me, the days suited me and had the job been different then it might have encouraged me to stay on longer, but it was just so, so boring and I just hated it’ (EC50F_retired)

Men, on the other hand, were more likely to comment that they had ‘done their bit’ and were now ‘off the treadmill’ (EC43M_retired) and had settled into their new phase of life and new routines. The majority had left school at 15 or 16 and had been working continuously since then, so by their mid-50s they had completed 40 years of working life.

‘I thought well it [retirement] gives me an opportunity to finish in full-time employment because basically you get to a stage where you’ve just had enough. You think well I’ve done the stint. I’ve done my time in the trenches and I think that’s it.’ (NS79M_retired).

Time and balance

The importance of time sovereignty (Atkinson and Hall, 2009; Fagan, 2001) was one of the strongest recurring theme across the interviews, as illustrated by the case of this Edinburgh couple, both in their mid-50s. They planned to retire at same time (when he reaches 63). They said that they would not consider flexible working as retirement means:

‘...time to do things, just time to do things, more time to yourself. Not having to get up at 6.30 or 7 in the morning. Go for more walks, time with the dogs.’ (EC37M+F_working)

This feeling was echoed by many respondents (working and retired, men and women), and it altered their attitudes towards flexible working, and to work-life balance, in later life. Where, previously, flexible working allowed them to accommodate life around working needs, they were now expressing change in their orientation to work; work took a back seat, and if done at all would need to fit around the rest of their lives.

'I want to be in the position where I want the job to suit me more than me suiting the jobYou know, three days a week would be fine, so that it gives me the freedom to have my life, because I don't want my life to revolve around work anymore. I want it to be the other way round.' (ES52F_retired)

Many felt like the man from Thanet:

'Retirement to me means you've worked hard all your life and now you should have a bit of fun if you know what I mean. Because when you're working 50-odd years or 45 years or whatever it is what time have you got to go and enjoy yourself?'(TC15M _not working, ill health)

This redressing of the balance between life and work was felt strongly by several men who wanted to focus on their families as they had missed out on this earlier in their lives. A typical case was ES48M_working, aged 63, who wanted to retire from a career in the building industry to spend time with his grandchildren. He viewed this as compensation for missing out on his own children's early years.

Choice and control

In the main, this was a male discourse, articulated by men who had chosen to work flexibly as well as those who had rejected flexible working in their transition to retirement or as a way of extending their working lives.

Only a minority of respondents had worked flexibly to accommodate health problems and these were all men. Most were in Edinburgh or Nottingham (i.e. the more affluent areas of our study), and had taken ill-health retirement from their principal job, e.g. police force, and were now working in quite different jobs. Flexible working for these people was characterised by a high degree of control and autonomy, achieved by being self-employed, e.g. as a taxi driver. A mere four men reported working flexibly in their current jobs to allow them to deal with health issues. A man in Nottingham who had cancer and was going back to work after chemotherapy commented on how good his employer had been:

‘You don’t think about it when you take a job but like over the last five years I’ve probably had I think 10 months off work on full pay and you never think about that when you go for a job. I mean a lot of jobs, after a month, they’ll probably say you’re on your own. It’s been very important.’ (NS72M_ working)

Choice also manifested itself in relation to choosing not to work flexibly: for example, a retired man in Edinburgh who took voluntary severance when he was 60. He had considered other employment (e.g. taxi driver, delivery man) but ‘didn’t want to be at beck and call...if I was going to do something I wanted to be able to do it when I wanted to, when it suited me.’ He was financially worse off, but subsequently his wife has been diagnosed with

breast cancer and this reinforced his sense that he needed to manage his own time (EC32M_retired).

Where women spoke of choice, this was almost exclusively in terms of rejecting flexible working as they wished to continue building their careers, to upgrade rather than downgrade. For some women who had put their careers on the back burner to raise their families later working life was viewed as the time to renew or even start a new career. Examples included: NC61F_working who had worked part-time in supermarkets while bringing up her family and was only now able to work full-time in her 'proper' job as an accountant and to return to the 'normal world'; and TC10F_working, aged 69, who had worked part-time for most of her career – caring for children and then her mum, but she started working full-time 6 years ago...because of the money and 'partly just the stimulation of going to work each day.' Her husband is younger than she is and is retired.

Discourses of choice and control from both men and women were often predicated on perceptions and previous experiences of flexible work as being poor quality work. While retailers such as B&Q have raised the profile of employing older workers, it is quite clear that such publicity has also served to reinforce the idea that the jobs available are low-skilled, low-paid and with few prospects, a perception with empirical basis (see Lain, 2012; McGovern et al, 2004). This view, or 'suspicious perspective' (Simpson et al, 2012) acted as a very real deterrent for people across all employment statuses in the study,

and had especial resonance for women, many of whom had a history of part-time and fragmented working in jobs for which they were over-skilled.

Fitting in

This was an almost exclusively female discourse. Several women, especially those in less affluent situations, spoke of working flexibly throughout their lives in order to fit in paid work around childcare and other domestic commitments. For many, as in the case of TS9F_retired talking about work in her 30s, it was also clear that this 'fitting in' often involved trying to juggle several paid jobs

'I did a little bit of child minding at that time, you know, other than my own children....I worked as a school dinner lady. I did that for 10 years..... I did a little bit of seasonal cashier work, because everything fitted around the children at that stage.

Interviewer: OK. So then we go on to your 40s unless there's anything else.

Oh I... Sorry...

Interviewer: Yeah?

My only hesitation is because of my memory. I think I did a little bit of... a little bit of almost holiday fostering. I was a registered foster

parent but I really only did like respite care for families, so only short term.'

Later in life, even with the imperative of childcare removed, women still spoke about fitting in. Instead of working flexibly to fit in with their domestic roles, they opted to fit in by retiring completely from paid work, either to complement their husband's plans for retirement, or with their perceptions of what their employer expected of them. The desire to please their employer manifested itself in the finding that women were less aware of opportunities to work flexibly or retire gradually, less likely to want to ask in case it upset their employer, and more likely to retire in order not to be a nuisance. For example, TS9F_retired above who had fitted in so many jobs in her earlier life had retired partly because of job-related stress. However, when asked if she had considered working flexibly she replied,

'...there's so much unemployment you've got to make space somewhere for young blood hadn't you?'

A key implication of this point is that it problematizes the concept of gradual retirement. While previous research has observed that older women may leave labour market earlier than men because of lack of gradual retirement opportunities (e.g. Gielan, 2008), these findings show that for women already working part-time the scope for further reduction of hours may be limited.

Reflecting national patterns, many of our female respondents (and some of the men) had replaced childcare responsibilities with obligations to care for elderly dependents or partners who were ill. While in theory flexible working offers a way to combine employment and caring needs, the reality showed a mismatch between employee and employer needs. The overarching issue here was that existing FWOs did little to accommodate the often unpredictable nature of caring needs as in the case of NS79M_unemployed/retired who had to give up working completely to care for his mother who had dementia. Her needs meant that he could not fit in any work, even on a part-time basis, around his caring responsibilities.

Helping out

Again, this was a predominantly female discourse and shows how the boundaries for women between paid and unpaid work become even more blurred in later working life and in retirement. Firstly, women who had combined flexible working with childcare earlier in their lives typically spoke in terms of their entire time in work in terms of helping out (e.g. NC62F_working who helped with sustaining family work-life balance by working night shifts to complement her husband's working schedule, and who also helped through voluntary activity most often around the children's social activities). As with the discourse of fitting in, this discourse was extended into their approach to working later and/or into retirement. A woman in Nottingham was working for 8 hours a week as a personal carer for a doctor she had worked for when he was still in practice:

'I sort of help look after an old retired doctor and the job, now I've been with him for 15 years and so now I tend to go round about 10, 10.30 and come home around 2.30. Whichever days, but mainly, like I'm going again tomorrow, very often it's Monday and Thursday, but it can change depending on... I mean at the moment it's changing a bit because he's ill.' (NS64F_working).

A variant of this was those women who were working flexibly (or had given up work altogether) so as their daughters could work. These women 'helped out' by caring for grandchildren, as in the case of ES40F_working, who reduced her job at a GP practice to 8 hours per week in order to care for her grandson. Their flexibility often ensured that their daughters could work full-time. As one, a widow, said:

'I didn't want to leave the girls [her daughter and granddaughters] in the lurch.' (NS71F_retired)

Secondly, many women in our sample, who in addition to caring for dependents, 'helped out' by caring for neighbours and friends, all on an unpaid basis. For these women, flexibility meant something altogether wider than standard labour market definitions. One woman, who described herself as retired, was looking after a couple of elderly neighbours, doing their shopping, cleaning and personal care: 'it's unpaid as we've been friends for a long time' (TS21F_retired). Others, such as this woman from Nottingham

combined their own work with informal flexible working, in this case combining working 4-days per week in a credit control job with helping her husband once a week with administration tasks in his own company '.....and then she goes and does the shopping and such like'. (NS73M_working). Not only is this flexibility invisible to the formal economy, it may also not even be acknowledged as work by the women themselves. A woman in Thanet described herself as retired. Aged 63 she cares for her husband but:

I also do a tiny bit of work. I deliver free papers and I do about a day-and-a-half of that.....the reason I don't work is because I'm busy looking after other people, you know, him [her husband] and the grandchildren.'

TC5F_retired

Discussion and Conclusions

The contribution of this study has been to increase insights into and understanding of the relationships between gender, age and flexible working. At a descriptive level, our qualitative study confirmed what is known from quantitative sources: that the majority of older working men were working full time and were likely to continue doing so until they retire. Only a minority were interested in extending working lives or in gradual retirement, and opportunities were limited to those with more advantaged work histories and life circumstances. For the women, although part-time work was more typical, this reflected patterns of labour market engagement across the lifecourse, and

was often not suitable or desirable in later life when women took on new caring roles with respect to partners, elderly parents or grandchildren or simply wanted to leave boring jobs behind.

Beyond this, analysing the discourses of flexible working in later life facilitated a more in-depth examination of the relationships between gender, age and (flexible) working. Firstly, age may intensify some of the gender inequalities in experiences of flexible working – from our sample, as from national statistics, it is clear that the forms of flexible working undertaken by older men, notably self-employment, were characterised by rather higher levels of choice, autonomy and control than those typically undertaken by older women, especially those from less financially and educationally advantaged backgrounds. This mirrors findings from the Labour Force Survey which indicate that of the people working above state pension age two thirds of men are in jobs classed as higher skilled whilst the same proportion of women are working in jobs classified as low skilled (ONS 2013b). Secondly, for many women, flexibility was achieved outside the formal, paid work arena. Thirdly, our findings also showed that some older women may eschew flexible work in later life in order to take advantage of the opportunities offered by a ‘proper’ job, while some older men may wish to work flexibly (or not to work at all) in order to spend time with their families that they missed out on earlier in their lives. In line with Emslie and Hunt (2009; 167), such attention highlights ‘the way gender identities are continually reassessed and reconfigured’, and contribute to the current calls for adopting a ‘lifecourse’ perspective to the

understanding and managing work and careers (see e.g. Gardiner and Tomlinson 2009).

It is important to consider to what extent these gendered discourses of flexible work are limited to the current cohort of 50+ workers. It is posited that attitudes and orientations to work are highly influenced by people's expectations at the time they entered the labour market (Yeandle, 2005: 14) and that changing societal norms around maternal employment have influenced and will continue to influence labour market participation, especially for women (Martinengo et al, 2010). However, we note that despite the radical change in social norms and attitudes over the lifetime of our respondents, gender-roles still extend across the generations and may extend into future cohorts of older workers. Several of the women in our study had been forced to leave work under the 'marriage bar' or when they had their children, but their daughters now worked full time. However this apparent 'cohort difference' was only achieved by the older women 'sacrificing' their working lives to care for grandchildren. This finding underlines the fact that structural supports for working parents (mothers) lag behind societal attitudes, and calls into question what will happen when these daughters' daughters enter the workforce?

Thus, this more detailed consideration of older women's working trajectories problematizes once again rigid distinctions between paid and unpaid work in women's experience. Current notions of 'productive' or 'active' ageing through extending working life by flexible working are simply too narrow to

portray women's circumstances or to assess adequately their contribution to society. In particular we found that many of our older women were working flexibly and productively, but invisibly, on an informal basis. Moreover, much of this unpaid work is arguably even less visible than that undertaken by younger women because caring responsibilities for the elderly are viewed as less legitimate than obligations to small children, with the result that this type of caring is often hidden from employers (Gautin and Hagan, 2010, Alden, 2012). In addition, this lack of recognition of older women's 'work' renders it less visible in debates over extending working lives and of work-life balance in later lives. We concur with the observations made by Cebulla et al (2007: 865) that 'working longer in life may well lead to an extension or perpetuation of unequal domestic divisions of labour.' As such, the consequences for women of ignoring gender in later working life may be to intensify cultural and structural discrimination.

One way to overcome this lack of attention and to better address the relationships between gender and later working life is by considering more inclusive concepts of work, such as Glucksmann's (1995, 2005) Total Social Organisation of Labour (TSOL). TSOL highlights connections, overlaps and interactions across diverse socio-economic relations, and has been particularly instructive in understanding the complex nature of women's work in a changing society. Its two overarching principles are firstly to emphasise the interconnections between work activities, and secondly calling for a higher level of analysis than work itself. We feel there would be merit in extending this framework to better theorise women's relationship to work in later life and

to retirement. For example, a key dimension of TSOL is how women articulate work and non-work. We have shown how the blurring of boundaries extends into later working life and can render 'retirement' meaningless for many women.

Furthermore, in relation to TSOL's principle of raising the level of analysis, our study contributes to critiques of WLB which draw attention to the fact that WLB is still perceived as a personal, not a societal issue. As Emslie and Hunt (2009) note, this has led to the focus on individual strategies to better accommodate conflict or to achieve balance, as opposed to structural consideration of FWOs and attention to more affordable care. The consequences of this individual focus have also been examined in other critical accounts of flexible working. For example, Dick (2010) and Rigby and O'Brien-Smith (2010) both highlight the ways in which part-time working in practice may actually inhibit temporal flexibility on the part of the employee who feels they have to be available 'on-call' all the time. Moreover, Ford and Collinson (2011: 268) raise concern at the ways in which 'WLB discourses have intensified the pressure ...to strive to be the perfectly balanced human being.' Being released from this pressure is attractive to many reaching the end of their working lives. Our analysis has provided insight into the gendered nature of these pressures, with a particular focus on later working life.

In conclusion, a critical view of flexible working and the benefits it provides to older workers, their employers, and to society in general remains largely absent in policy debates on extending working lives. Our article has

presented a far more nuanced view by turning attention to the relationships between gender, flexible working and working in later life. We have argued that, not only are these relationships underexplored in empirical research, but that they are also under-theorised. Further attention to the ways in which gender roles are maintained, intensified or even challenged over the course of the working life is needed to more fully understand the complexity of constructions of later-life working and WLB, and to appreciate how retirement is changing and will continue to change into the future.

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Table 1: Details of individual employment status and household income by interview location.

Employment status	Edinburgh		Nottingham		Thanet	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Working	7	9	9	11	3	3
Unemployed/Inactive, but not retired	0	1	0	0	8	7
Retired/semi-retired	8	8	9	3	3	7
Totals	15	18	18	14	14	13
Number working/had most recently worked flexibly	3	8	2	9	2	3
Household Income band (£ per annum)	Edinburgh		Nottingham		Thanet	
Under 10,000	0		1		15	
10,000-20,000	8		13		9	
21,000-30,000	13		6		3	
31,000-40,000	5		6		0	
Over 41,000	2		5		1	
Unassigned*	5		1		3	

* Did not wish to reveal their income.

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank the DWP for funding this study and our colleagues who worked with us on the original project. We gratefully acknowledge the contribution of all the respondents. Thanks also to the reviewers and the editor whose constructive feedback and encouragement have considerably strengthened this article.

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Sarah Vickerstaff is Professor of Work and Employment and Head of the School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research at the University of Kent. Her research focuses upon paid work and the life course especially at the beginning and end of working life, and has been funded by research councils, charities and the UK Government. She is currently PI for a ESRC/MRC funded research consortium undertaking a mixed method study of: *Uncertain Futures: managing Late Career Transitions and Extended working Life*. Recent publications include: 'The Domestic and Gendered Context for Retirement' (W. Loretto and S. Vickerstaff) *Human Relations*, 66 (1) 2013: 65-86.

ⁱ The DWP were less interested in higher income earners as they typically have maximum choice over their retirement afforded by good pensions and privileged work histories. Instead they were more interested on the majority of the population who often face a variety of pressures at the end of their working lives.